

Progress in the Search for Tobacco Alternatives

Arnie Katz wants North Carolina tobacco farmers to start thinking about sweet potatoes.

As a staff member of the North Carolina Land Trustees (a nonprofit Durham based group), Katz is busy exploring alternatives to tobacco production. The sweet potato is just one of many vegetables and even fruits that can be grown successfully in the Piedmont area.

Katz's interest stems from fears over the future of the federal tobacco program, under which producers are guaranteed both a price and a market for their tobacco crops. It is very likely that major changes, including lower price support levels, will be made in the tobacco program within the next year.

The primary problem in switching from tobacco to other crops is marketing. Only tobacco offers the safety of a guaranteed market. One of the most profitable alternatives, vegetable and fruit production, is hampered by a complex marketing system of centralized terminal markets and brokers. This system is a difficult one for an independent farmer to break into and get crops marketed.

In spite of marketing difficulties, vegetable and fruit production is clearly a potential alternative to tobacco. Unlike grains, which require substantial acreage for profitability, vegetables and fruits can be profitably produced on three to five acre farms. A 1980 ranking of crops according to their net return per acre found that trellis grown tomatoes topped the list, followed by strawberries (fresh market), apples, peaches, and pick-your-own strawberries. Tobacco was ranked as sixth, with blueberries, cucumbers, watermelons and sweet potatoes rounding out the top ten.

Many tobacco farmers in the southeast grow a small amount of vegetables for their own consumption and for sale at roadside produce

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stands. Few farmers, however, have been able to substitute vegetable production for their current tobacco crop, primarily because of marketing difficulties.

A group of Chatham County, North Carolina farmers have decided to improve this situation. About four years ago, they established the Piedmont Vegetable Marketing Cooperative in an effort to strengthen their access to local and regional produce markets. The North Carolina Land Trustees assisted by holding meetings with other area farmers and providing technical help.

Katz is enthusiastic about the potential of the Cooperative, while realizing it faces an uncertain future. Currently, its main handicap is money. The Co-op needs to purchase a build-

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ing for collecting, washing, grading, and packing the vegetables grown by its members. While many Piedmont area farmers have expressed interest in joining the Co-op, only a few have been able to support it financially. As Katz explained, most small farmers do not have funds available to invest in the Co-op at this time of year.

Unfortunately, local banks have so far been unwilling to loan the Co-op the needed funds. Farmers interested in the project had hoped to borrow money from the Farmers Home Administration, but local FHA supervisors have not supported the Co-op venture. In general, the attitude of the FHA toward alternative crop production for tobacco farmers has not been positive.

Despite fiscal difficulties, the Piedmont Vegetable Marketing Cooperative has mapped out a strategy for vegetable production and marketing. Once the warehouse is purchased (if and when the funds become available), participating farmers initially will grow a mixture of three vegetables: sweet potatoes (75%) and cucumbers/peppers (25%). After the Co-op becomes established in local and regional produce markets, then members could decide to grow other vegetables as well. Katz emphasized that decisions in the Co-op would be made by a board of directors,

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comprised entirely of farmers. In addition, a manager would be hired to keep track of the produce markets.

The North Carolina Agricultural Marketing Project (NCAMP) is another group that helps small farmers organize to market their produce. NCAMP works on a smaller scale than that proposed by the Piedmont Vegetable Marketing Cooperative. It serves restaurants and independent grocery stores as well as private citizens through various farmers markets and direct marketing systems. There are eighteen cities and towns in North Carolina that have farmers markets or direct marketing arrangements. "This year," says Richard Pipan, co-director of NCAMP, "we are moving towards bulk marketing, which gets food to groups not served by the present distribution system -- schools, food buying clubs, and religious groups. So now we're trying to organize citizens as well as growers in order to expand the number of people who can benefit from cheaper, fresher food."

There are several ways planners and private citizens can work towards a better distribution and marketing system, according to Pipan. One way is to insist that local produce be featured in chain grocery stores. Planners can help by amending approved use ordinances to include farmers markets. For example, the town of Wilson, North Carolina has a system where any public land, church or school can be used for a farmers market on a permit basis. As pointed out by Pipan, existing structures can be used for a farmers market -- new facilities need not be constructed. Durham, North Carolina uses a recreation center for a farmers market.

With the establishment of better marketing opportunities, vegetable and fruit production is indeed a viable alternative to tobacco production for many farmers, especially those with small farms. The need to explore such alternatives is becoming more urgent as reforms to the tobacco program are proposed. As a recent editorial in the Raleigh News and Observer succinctly noted: "To the public officials and the farmers of North Carolina, the message should be clear: diversify."

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ers) to the Legislative Study Committee on Migrants. Among them are:

- Regulating crewleaders by establishing eligibility standards for licensing by the state.
- Establishing contractual guidelines concerning migrant farmworkers' wages.
- Legislating standards for piece rate work to guarantee the farmworkers at least the equivalent of the minimum hourly wage.
- Enacting a uniform housing code.
- Assigning migrant farmworker camp inspections to one agency, the Division of Health Services, which already has the trained personnel and has easier access to the camps through its regional offices.

In order to facilitate communication among health care facilities concerning tests and health care treatments of migrant farmworkers, health records could be transferred along with the school records of migrant children; North Carolina presently has a computerized transfer system for school records already in operation.

Presently, because of a national policy also followed by the state, only three OSHA standards which cover general industry are applied to agricultural work (one concerning tractors, anhydrous ammonia and minimum housing conditions for migrant camps). Existing standards for general industry, and/or new standards need to be extended to agricultural workers. For example, worker protection standards concerning warnings for pesticide spraying (including the posting of warnings in fields which are being sprayed or have been sprayed), establishing safe re-entry times for working in fields which are sprayed, and providing gloves, eye goggles and other equipment for protection against pesticide poisoning are all needed to ensure a safe working environment for farmworkers.

North Carolina is a state of highly productive farmland; it is the nation's largest producer of both tobacco and sweet potatoes, it ranks second in growing cucumbers for pickles, fifth in snap beans, cabbage, and green peppers, sixth in peaches, seventh in apples, but last in wages and in legal protections for the migrant workers who pick those crops.

On February 26, 1982, the first meeting of the Legislative Study Committee on Migrants in North Carolina was convened. Co-chair Rep. Malcolm Fulcher, from Carteret County, stated "I hope this commission will not be just another study commission." The migrant farmworkers who pick North Carolina's crops will soon be returning for the summer harvest. They have little time left for inaction.